

Craig Wong
TH100DL Fall 2016
Credo Assignment
12/04/2016

On Humankind & Sin

Insight from the *Rule of St. Benedict* and the *Rule of St. Francis*

In this short credo, I attempt to draw theological insight on the nature of humankind and sin, based on the documents of two Western monastic orders, the 6th century *Rule of St. Benedict* and the 13th century *Rule of St. Francis*. I have elected to adopt this approach on the basis that the monastic impulse and enterprise to help human beings live rightly (“through the wise ordering of the monastic life with strict discipline¹”) before God, would have the inherent capacity to elucidate meaningful theological anthropology for the interested reader.

Humankind is created by, and therefore accountable to, God. In the instructions that St. Benedict outlines for abbots (the spiritual head of a monastery), imperative is given to “do everything in the fear of the Lord...knowing that he will surely have to give account to God for all his decisions, as to a most impartial judge.²” Similarly, brothers living under the authority of the Franciscan order are expected to obey their ministers “in all things which they have promised God to observe.³

Humankind was designed to live lives of obedience before God. At the heart of the monastic life is the practice of obedience to godly authority, and the understanding that one’s ultimate wellbeing depended on it. Fundamentally, this belief is inherent in one’s submission to a

¹ Justo Gonzales, *The Story of Christianity: Volume 1* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010).

² Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder, *Documents of the Christian Church, 4th Edition* (New York: Oxford Press, 2011), p. 128.

³ Bettenson and Maunder, p.145.

Rule to begin with (“In all things, let all follow the Rule...let no one diverge from it.”⁴) St. Francis leads out, in his Rule, by promising “obedience and reverence to our Lord Pope” [and expects the others] be bound to obey”⁵ in kind. But it is further reinforced by extensive delineation of consequences, particularly for Benedictines who veer from the Rule, for example, temporary isolation from the rest of the body, on one end, to flogging and excommunication on the other.

Humankind struggles with the sin of pride. The rules give significant attention to practices needed to foster humility as a corrective to pride. In the Benedictine Rule, the brothers are encouraged toward brevity in prayer, as they are to “recognize that we are heard not for our much speaking, but for our purity of heart and tears of contrition.”⁶ St. Francis instructs similarly, in the context of traveling ministry engagements: “Let discourse be brief, for the words which the Lord spoke upon earth were brief.” He also admonishes his followers to receive other brothers with a posture of servanthood, to not look down on those of weaker constitution (or displaying lesser ascetic commitment), and to “be on guard against all pride, vainglory [and to] pray always to God with a pure heart that they have humility.”⁷

Humankind struggles with sins of the flesh. Aware of the reality of sexual temptation, St. Francis strictly charges “all brethren not to hold conversation with women [and to] not enter nunneries” to avoid the possibility of scandal. Although not referenced in the Rule, we see from other accounts that he instructed such discipline out of his own experience, for example, when he would “plunge in winter into a pit full of ice and remain there until all fleshly taint withdrew

⁴ Bettenson and Mauder, p.128.

⁵ Ibid., p.142.

⁶ Ibid., p.129.

⁷ Ibid., p.145.

from him [in response to] fleshly temptation.⁸” In what was likely driven from related sensibilities, St. Benedict did not allow the younger brothers to “have beds by themselves, but [to be] dispersed among the senior.”⁹ On the occasion of visiting guests, he allows for a kiss of greeting, but on the condition that the “kiss of peace shall not first be offered unless a prayer have preceded, on account of the wiles of the devil.”¹⁰

Humankind was designed to be fully dependent on the Creator. On a final note, both Rules prescribe lives of simplicity that seek to detach its followers from worldly materiality and foster grateful dependence on God for all their needs. St. Benedict’s Rule has sections explicitly addressing the appropriate amount of food and drink, for example, that “all shall bless God and not grumble.”¹¹ St. Francis leads the followers of his Rule in this way: “The brothers shall possess nothing, neither a house, nor a place, nor anything. But, as pilgrims and strangers in this world, serving God in poverty and humility, they shall confidently seek alms, and not be ashamed, for the Lord made Himself poor in this world for us.”¹²

⁸ John Coakley and Andrea Sterk, *Readings in World Christian History, Volume I: Earliest Christianity to 1453* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004), 4.66.

⁹ Bettenson and Mauder, p.129.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.137.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.134.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 143.